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ABSTRACT

Establishing instructional priorities in public schools is a worthwhile and important process. Because time and money are insufficient to increase staffing in schools, setting priorities is a necessary component of successful managing. Steps to be taken in setting instructional priorities are as follows: (1) Adopt a statement of mission describing the reason the school exists and a rationale for the district's goals. (2) Adopt a statement of beliefs about student learners. Staff and community should carefully consider the competing philosophies and arrive at a consensus view. (3) Adopt a set of beliefs about the role of parents and school-home cooperation. (4) Adopt a set of general objectives describing what students should accomplish in school. (5) Rank the general objectives in order of priority. This allows resources to be allocated in accordance with what is most important. (6) Have curriculum committies develop statements of belief for each subject area before purchasing materials. By this process, a district can effectively establish instructional priorities. (WTH)

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AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS

ANNUAL CONVENTION

HOW TO ESTABLISH INSTRUCTIONAL PRIORITIES

February 22, 1987

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I commend AASA for scheduling this topic. I say this for I do not think it is high on the list of interests for many people attending the convention. I commend you for your interest--I hope you will hear me out and feel that you have spent the time profitably.

I will first talk briefly about my reasons for believing there is little interest in establishing instructional priorities, then I will explain why I think there should be a great deal of interest in the topic. Most of the presentation will be devoted to describing the way in which I think you go about determining priorities.

In the last portion I would like to have you in the audience react to my remarks by sharing your views about the importance of setting and using instructional priorities.

I started out by saying I thought there was little interest in the topic of setting instructional objectives. I said this for in my twenty-five years experience in public schools--in districts considered to be good ones--we never spent much time discussing the topic and I don't recall hearing other school people seriously address the issue.

As a part of long range planning, or as a part of a review of the school district's philosophy and objectives we doubtlessly have all spent a little time talking about instructional priorities. In those discussions we surely restated that the basic skills were the **most** important aspect of the instructional program and then we moved on. Such a perfunctory reevaluation of the district goals is hardly what I would call establishing instructional priorities.

Another reason I believe there is little interest in the topic is because of the way I have seen districts managed. In the districts in which I have worked, whatever statements have been made about instructional priorities have been set aside once they were developed. They therefore have not been used in the day-to-day management of the district. Certainly such philosophical statements were given little or no heed in the budget development process.

If your district does not make use of instructional priorities, if having them is nothing more than window dressing in the policy book for you, the topic probably seems rather unimportant to you.

Hopefully I will convince you in this presentation that setting instructional objectives is a worthwhile part of the management process for your district. If I can do this, then perhaps you will go home and give the matter a great deal of serious thought.

I have prepared a handout covering the steps in the process. These handouts will be available at the conclusion of my remarks so you don't have to try to remember the steps I have described.

I will move on, then, to my second topic, the reason why I think you should seriously consider setting instructional priorities.

My interest in the topic goes back to two specific statements made to me a number of years ago, one by a principal, the other by a group of interested citizens. A wise principal once said to me, "When everything is important, nothing is important." The principal made this statement when he found his boss unwilling to set priorities--that is, unwilling to admit that some tasks were less important than others.

When the principal first made the statement I did not agree with it. As I have reflected upon it I have decided he was absolutely correct. If we are unwilling to say that one subject area is more less important than another as they all compete for time in the school day, dollars for materials, or for staff inservice time, it has the same effect as saying that none of them are important.

If we are unwilling to say that **within** a subject area, **certain** skills or **certain** knowledge is more important than some other then it is like saying that none is important.

The second statement that changed my views came from a small group of citizens who were complaining to me, the superintendent, about the budget making process. They were complaining that it was always historical, that is, that we thought in terms of mere adjustments to last year's budget rather than stepping back to look at our priorities and attempting to increase allocations to some programs and decreasing them to others on the basis of instructional priorities.

If we look around us today we can see plenty of evidence that our society's refusal to allocate resources according to priorities is costing us dearly. Study after study reports that our students are not competing with their foreign counter parts. We know that we are losing the jobs that existed for poorly educated workers, thus we no longer have a place for marginal students in the work force and must allocate more resources to educating them to a higher level of competency.

We all are familiar with the fact that there is not enough money to finance everything the society wants us to do. Our politicians seem to assign money to the military, regardless of the needs for improving our educational programs and feeding our people. But before we criticize them lets look at ourselves, we school people do not do any better than the politicians in placing the emphasis where it should be.

Since there is not enough time in the day to teach every subject we would like to teach; since there is not enough time **within** a subject area for students to master everything, and since there aren't enough dollars to add more staff to do these things, is it not time to think about setting priorities and using them to manage the district?

Let me give you an example of the way in which we can fail to take seriously the emphasis on basic skills that most schools espouse. We probably will all agree that a broad high school curriculum is desirable for today's high school students. In small districts a broad curriculum means that many classes are

very small. I know of three small districts in which 15% of their high school classes have enrollments between one and three students, the median class size being 11.

At the same time, required subjects such as English, biology, and the first two years of math are being operated with class sizes similar to the size of elementary and junior high classes, a size of 22.

At the same time as 15% of their classes are being operated for 3 or less pupils, teachers reported that they have many students whose reading and math skills are deficient enough so as to impede their progress in other areas of the curriculum.

The question should not be, "Is it beneficial to provide our high school students a wide variety of courses?" The answer is obvious--of course we should. The real question should be, "Given the instructional priorities of the district, given the needs of **all** of our students in grades K-12, given the financial conditions of this district, should we continue operating so many classes for so few, or should we find a way to economize so that more money can be spent on other facets of the program?

The willingness to provide a wide range of electives while large numbers of students are failing to learn the fundamentals is a case of failure to take seriously what we all mouth--we say the priorities are on reading and writing but we take no action to show we are serious about it.

I have been an elementary educator almost my whole career. Throughout my entire public school career the school philosophy emphasized the fundamentals taught in the elementary school and at the same time an inordinate share of the money was spent at the secondary level. If you follow the steps I am going to outline, you might decide to make some changes if that pattern exists in your district.

I am advocating that you manage a district like the citizens sitting in my office several years ago were advocating. I am suggesting that the community determine its instructional priorities--deciding what all children must learn, what else each desirably **should** learn, and finally, what would be nice for each to learn.

I am advocating that you assess your children regularly on the objectives you think are critical, and that you reallocate student time, staff time, and money for materials to those children who are not meeting your standards.

I <u>am not</u> suggesting you go out and raise new amounts of money, I'm suggesting you reallocate--and I know that you can't do that unless you have a board and community behind you! If you did what I am suggesting without board and community support you'll probably be job hunting soon!

If I have not said enough to convince you that managing a school in accordance with your instructional priorities makes sense, challenge me in the period for questioning.

I am going to give you an overview of the steps I think should be followed in setting instructional priorities. Setting such priorities is an eight step process as I see it. This is not to suggest that each step is done one at a time in an orderly sequence. Several of the steps are ongoing--they may be done every year, or in a constant cycle of revision of the instructional program.

STEP 1. ADOPT A STATEMENT OF MISSION

I believe a district should consider what it thinks is important by developing a concise statement that describes in simple, clear language the reason for which the district exists. A district needs such a mission statement to guide the actions of the staff, the board, and the community. Hopefully, all will accept this statement and make a commitment to this common cause for which the district is operated.

A mission statement should describe the reason for which the schools exist and provide a rationale for all the district's goals and objectives. The paragraphs below will serve as an example of such a mission statement:

> The Able District schools exist to meet two essential needs, the need for the state to have a highly educated, moral citizenry and the need for individual students to become competent, involved citizens with a sense of self-worth.
>
> To this purpose the district schools shall be operated. When resources are not available to allow all goals and objectives emanating from this mission to be met, priority shall always be given to providing all students the fundamental study skills that will allow them to be successful in their school endeavors.

The next phase of the process is to accept a set of beliefs about students that is congruent with the mission statement.

STEP 2: ADOPT A STATEMENT OF BELIEFS ABOUT STUDENT LEARNERS

Many of the actions a district takes, or fails to take, are based on its implicit beliefs about students. If a district believes that only some students can be successful it will organize instruction and teach so only some succeed.

If a staff believes that only children of middle and upper income families can earn "A" grades, the grading system will be structured accordingly. If the school views children with learning difficulties as incapable, they will be excused from learning many of the fundamentals. If the school views gifted athletes as having special privileges it will not require them to learn what others have to learn.

If the staff believes minority students are incapable of behaving as well other students it will lower its standards for them and many of the students will behave accordingly.

Since these implicit beliefs about students affect so many decisions a staff and board make, the staff and community should carefully consider the competing philosophies and arrive at a consensus view about learners that can become a well-defined guide for the district's actions. Examples of such belief statements are as follows:

The Able District believes that:

All students except those in programs for the Mentally Disabled are capable of learning to read, write, and compute if they are taught at the correct instructional level and provided enough time to learn.

All students have the need to be treated with respect.

All students are capable of meeting the behavior standards of the district if the pupils are treated in accordance with recognized principles of mental health and behavior management.

Students develop a sense of self-worth by being successful in their school work.

Students will learn more in less time if they are motivated to learn.

Students will learn more in less time if their personal lives are rewarding and intact.

Back in the olden days virtually all parents strongly supported the school. We read about how this is still true in some other cultures, such as Japan. We all know that this is no longer true today in many of our schools. For example, we are constantly being criticized about the little amount of home work the typical American school requires.

You and I know how successful a school would be if it suddenly started requiring the amount of homework demanded in many foreign schools. Students couldn't participate in so many school activities, they couldn't keep their jobs, they couldn't make the payments on their cars, or even spend so much time listening to music or watching TV. Within a short time, people would be marching to board meetings to complain!

No effort to improve the education for all children will be successful unless we work with our communities to explain what we are attempting and to develop a set of expectations for parents.

STEP 3. ADOPT A SET OF BELIEFS ABOUT THE ROLE OF PARENTS AND SCHOOL-HOME COOPERATION

If we will carefully examine our attitudes toward parents we will find a stance that is hard to rationalize. We like to complain about the failure of parents to support the school. At the same time as we are complaining, we find many parents who are very unhappy, for the school seems to try to lock them out--it tries to prevent parents from helping their children.

This holding parents at a distance seems to be especially true for the child who is having academic difficulties and the parents want to help. The school often says "Stay out, you can't help, we are the only ones that can teach your child." On one hand we criticize parents for not supporting us, on the other, we resent their intrusion when they try to provide assistance for their children.

I believe districts should work with parents in developing statements that describe the support the school and home must provide each other if students are going to learn what they need to become productive, useful citizens. This step is necessary for by themselves, schools cannot insure that a student meets the objectives of instruction nor as already has been stated, can it any longer assume that parents will support the school. Examples of such statements are:

> Parents should provide the time, place, supervision and encouragement for their children's home study.
>
> Parents should insure that their children attend school daily and promptly report any absence or tardiness the day it occurs.
>
> The school should regularly inform parents of their children's progress and offer ways the parents can help their children improve their skills and knowledge.
>
> Parents and teachers should work together to maintain a shared responsibility for children's behavior at school.

Even though we know that we can't force parents to cooperate, certainly we should at least help them understand why the school is raising its requirements so that they would at least not oppose us in making changes in our requirements to benefit their children.

STEP 4: ADOPT A SET OF GENERAL OBJECTIVES DESCRIBING WHAT STUDENTS SHOULD ACCOMPLISH IN SCHOOL.

The board of education should adopt a set of objectives to guide the staff in designing an instructional program that fulfills the mission of the school. These objectives should describe what students are to learn or do. The objectives should be specific enough to dictate decisions about the instructional program and general enough to be few in number. Examples are:

All students should conduct themselves in accordance with the behavior standards of their school.

All students should complete appropriate classroom assignments within reasonable time limits set by their teachers.

All written work submitted to teachers should meet the school's standards of neatness and legibility.

All students, other than those in programs for the Mentally Disabled, should master the fundamental skills of learning by the time they leave the district's elementary schools.

All students beyond the kindergarten level should use their skills of learning in gaining new knowledge and skills.

All students should demonstrate good health habits and an appreciation for the safety of themselves and others.

All students should demonstrate a fundamental knowledge and appreciation of their history and culture.

All students should demonstrate an understanding of the principles of human behavior and how they may be used to make changes in the society.

All students should demonstrate a fundamental knowledge and appreciation of their physical environment.

All students should demonstrate a knowledge and appreciation of the arts.

All students should demonstrate a knowledge of the world of work and the prerequisite skills necessary for entry into it or into appropriate higher education programs.

All students should develop a knowledge, appreciation and use of leisure time activities.

These statements are in contrast to those districts often adopt. They often have philosophical statements containing objectives which provide no practical direction to the staff, they are but window dressing in the policy book.

Three types of errors are often found in such statements: (1) Some objectives call for the school to be responsible for things far beyond the ability of the school to deliver; (2) Some objectives may be so vague that the staff cannot see the way to meet them; and, (3) Some objectives may include so many "outs" that they serve no important function. An example of each type of error appears below:

The school shall develop students who are good citizens.

The school should not assume such a broad responsibility for it controls but a few of the factors that determine what kind of a citizen a student will become.

The school shall develop in students an understanding and appreciation for the democratic way of life.

The meaning of the term, "democratic way of life" is vague and ways to achieve it are debatable. The statement provides insufficient direction to the staff.

Each student shall be given the opportunity to master, commensurate with his/her ability, the basic skills of reading, communication, and computation.

This objective is meaningless for it may be met by merely providing the subject of reading in the curriculum. Further, it suggests the school has some way of accurately knowing a student's ability when in fact it can but crudely estimate it. It incorrectly suggests that slower learning students cannot learn to read and thus allows a staff to disclaim responsibility for its failures.

Few districts have enough time or money to provide **all** students what they need to meet the general objectives. The district should therefore set priorities so expenditures of time and money can be made on the basis of what is most important for students to learn in school.

STEP 5: RANK THE GENERAL OBJECTIVES IN ORDER OF PRIORITY

The issue of "breadth vs depth" exists within every district and within every classroom. Should the curriculum planners include all that is desirable or should they restrict the list of topics and place more emphasis on learning them in greater depth?

Does the instructor teach **all** that is in the curriculum regardless of how well students learn it, or does he/she select **certain** elements and see that they are mastered? Since this issue of breadth vs depth exists every day in every classroom, the staff, board and community should try to achieve consensus as to what is most important among subject areas and **within** each subject.

The national reports about schools issued during the last several years have illuminated weaknesses in schools that are manifestations of the "breadth vs depth" issue. The reports claim that millions of students leave the schools without learning the basic skills of literacy. One report claimed the problem was so great that our nation was actually at risk.

We constantly read of international comparisons that show our students learning less than their counterparts from several other nations. At the local level, superintendents and board members are all too aware of burgeoning

enrollments in Learning Disability and Behavior Disorder programs, even when total school enrollments are declining. These are but reminders that many students are not learning the fundamentals, that mastery of the skills of learning has been sacrificed to breadth.

The inadequate skills of many students, the shortage of time we have with all students, the financial condition of most schools, and the mood of the public dictate that the school cannot achieve everything it wants with all students. Decisions about allocation of time and money **should** be made on the basis of thoughtful consideration of the importance of each overall student objective. Therefore, setting priorities for the general objectives is vital to developing a sound instructional program.

Priorities determined on the basis of student needs are not always the same as what some community members want. When a superintendent or board of education senses that community values are in conflict with student needs they should take the lead in developing a consensus. This may turn out to be a compromise between two sets of conflicting values, what is important for students, and what the community wants.

This kind of ranking is exactly what a school needs if resources are going to be allocated in accordance with what is most important.

STEP 6: HAVE CURRICULUM COMMITTEES DEVELOP STATEMENTS OF BELIEF FOR EACH SUBJECT AREA

As a part of the curriculum improvement process, a district staff should develop statements describing what it believes about each subject area. This step is necessary prior to selection of curriculum materials because the committee needs to know what the experts in the subject area believe. This information should help the committee determine priorities and make decisions about what to include in the curriculum, what type of text is needed, etc.

The committee needs to develop such beliefs **before** studying textbooks for publishers often put in books what sells, not what is necessarily most effective in helping students learn the local district's objectives. Setting priorities for the general objectives and developing belief statements thus is vital to developing a sound instructional program.

As a district committee goes about the task of determining what it believes about the teaching of a subject area it should study the following:

The general objectives of the district. The general objectives, previously discussed, should help determine what the district believes about a subject area curriculum. For example, in the examples given, the fourth and fifth objectives have obvious implications for the district's reading program.

Research findings and expert opinion. The committee should search professional books and journals to find what research and expert opinion say about the teaching of the subject area.

To arrive at such a consensus people in the different groups obviously must be involved in developing the statements and the priorities. My experience suggests the best way to do this is to have committees of teachers and administrators develop tentative statements that are considered by the board in open forums or work sessions where parents and other citizens can be honestly involved in considering the statements developed by the staff. After the statements are discussed in open forum the superintendent normally revises them and places them on the board's agenda for formal consideration.

DEVELOPING THE SUBJECT AREA STATEMENTS OF BELIEF AND STUDENT OBJECTIVES

The staff should develop these statements using its normal curriculum development procedures. Often this means that a committee of teachers and administrators develops the material and provides an opportunity for the entire professional staff and the board of education to react. After considering the feedback from these sources, the committee often makes changes and the public is given a chance to react to the statements in open forums before they are formally considered by the board of education.

FINAL THOUGHTS

By using the processes described in this paper a district can effectively establish instructional priorities. The task should not stop here, however. If the priorities are not used, the exercise was of little value. The instructional priorities must be used on a day-to-day basis to make decisions in the classroom, the administrative offices, and in the board room. The administration and board must be willing to make the hard management decisions to change the school program to allow the mission statements they believe are so vital to be accomplished.

Before giving you the opportunity to react to my remarks may I quote Ernest Boyer, president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. In a speech last September to the National Press Club he was reviewing the status of educational reform in the United States. He expressed concern for the lack of progress and expressed a need for changing our priorities. More specifically he said:

> I'm talking about reordering the educational priorities of the nation by giving more support to early education and more backing to primary school teachers.
>
> Indeed, I'm convinced that if we would give as much status to first-grade teachers as we give to full professors, that one act alone would go a long way to bring excellence to the nation's schools.

If you agree with such a statement you'll need a process by which you can review your instructional priorities--I hope I have given you some ideas about the way in which it may be accomplished.